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Hero/Heroine: A Study of the Representation of Womanhood in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Literature

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*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station
will be held by anybody else, these pages must show...*

- Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Introduction

Shirley by Charlotte Brontë and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* by Libba Bray have many surface differences. They are set in vastly different worlds (*Shirley* in the early nineteenth century English countryside and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* in late Victorian London) and as such their characters lead different lives. Bray's characters are students at a finishing school; Brontë's have no such opportunity for formal education. Bray's characters have access to magic the likes of which Brontë's Shirley and Caroline probably couldn't even dream. The characters in *Shirley* have the rather ladylike fantasy of marrying their true loves; Bray's Gemma has different and much more daring aspirations. But what they share is the fight, the struggle to get what they want in a society that would happily make them into something else. All of the central female characters face opposition (due to their gender) as they try to lead independent lives. The novels share other similarities as well: both are set in an era earlier than that in which they are written, both are penned by female authors, and both deal with the experience of transitioning from a girl into a woman. This last similarity also results in a similar audience – both novels are intended to be read by girls and young women. Some of the issues raised in the novels are era-specific (i.e. corsets and the suffocating expectations they represent). But many more are experiences that today's girls and

young women also have to navigate: balancing a family's wishes with their own, dealing with developing sexuality, and falling in love, to name a few. These similarities between the two novels are the basis for comparison: by bringing the two novels together, I hope to examine the common experiences (and unique challenges) that women face in different times as well as to study two authors who place their stories in their respective pasts and figure out why they do so.

In this paper, I will argue that both Brontë and Bray choose to set their stories in the past in order to discover the roots of the present and that Bray chooses the Victorian era in particular in order to better convey the themes and issues that she is trying to represent in her novels. Further, I will argue that Bray combines the image of a modern woman with the confines of the Victorian era so that the changes that have come about over time become clear through the juxtaposition of the two opposing forces. Her main characters are only able to fight for their futures because of their modern mindsets: their independent streaks make them different from the other girls in the novel, the prototypes of Victorian ladies. She graces them with supernatural power in order to enable their modernity to manifest itself.

In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens questions whether his protagonist will be the hero of his own life. Both Brontë and Bray ask the same question of their characters: will they be able to be the heroes (or heroines) of their own lives, or will that role be played by someone else? Once he escapes from under the oppressive thumb of his stepfather, Copperfield has won the worst battle – society welcomes him and his attempts to build a successful life for himself. For the girls in these novels, it is a very different story. There is not just one person forcing them to live a certain kind of life; there is a whole society, an entire era, pressuring them to live up to the status quo. Even if they manage to break free, it will be a freedom that is questioned and challenged everyday, one that must be continuously re-established. Whether the girls, under the aforementioned pressures, can become the heroines of their own lives, these pages must show...

Part 1

They both halted on the green brow of the Common: they looked down on the deep valley robed in May raiment; on varied meads, some pearled with daises, and some golden with king-cups: to-day all this young verdure smiled clear in sunlight; transparent emerald and amber gleams played over it. On Nunwood – the sole remnant of antique British forest in a region whose lowlands were once all sylvan chase, as its highlands were breast-deep heather – slept the shadow of a cloud; the distant hills were dappled, the horizon was shaded and tinted like mother-of-pearl; silvery blues, soft purples, evanescent greens and rose-shades, all melting into fleeces of white cloud, pure as azury snow, allured the eye as with a remote glimpse of heaven's foundations. The air blowing on the brow was fresh, and sweet, and bracing.

'Our England is a bonnie island,' said Shirley, 'and Yorkshire is one of her bonniest nooks.'

(Brontë, Shirley 177-178)

Shirley by Charlotte Brontë tells the story of Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar as they try to navigate the difficult transition from girlhood to womanhood. Soon after the start of the novel, Shirley moves to Fieldhead and befriends Caroline. Shirley is a wealthy orphan; she is strong-minded, independent, and capable. Caroline lives with her uncle and, though not as spirited as Shirley, often seems to wish for the same kind of freedom that Shirley artlessly claims for herself. Each of the girls is in love with one of the Moore brothers – Caroline with Robert, who owns the local mill, and Shirley with Louis, her former tutor, though neither can marry her love because both men are in poor economic situations (Robert's mill is failing and Louis is, after all, just a tutor). The novel follows the girls as they simultaneously try to live their own lives *and* win the hearts of their beloveds and marry them (thus, ironically, removing any possibility of living their own lives, free and clear). This section will examine both why Brontë sets her novel almost forty years before she writes it as well as why Caroline and Shirley ultimately give up their freedom and independence for marriage, especially since the end of the novel indicates that it has, perhaps, cost them not only their freedom but also their happiness.

Brontë's novel was published in 1849, yet it's set in 1812. Besides the fact that Brontë explicitly states this on the first page of the novel, there are numerous markers that she uses throughout the novel to make her setting authentic. For example, within the first ten pages comes the following passage: "All amongst the trees he saw moving objects, red, like poppies, or white, like May-blossom... He then perceived they were soldiers – thousands and tens of thousands... They formed in order, he affirmed, and marched, regiment after regiment, across the park" (15). This simple insert, which is a description of troop movement across the countryside, helps to plant the reader's mind firmly in 1812, when wars were being fought with both France and America. Also, later in the novel, a group of men come to destroy Robert Moore's mill on the premise that the machinery he uses is stealing their jobs – one of just several references (though albeit the most prominent) to the Luddite uprisings of the time.

A Great and Terrible Beauty, the novel I will talk about later in this paper, also looks back at an earlier time, and both of these works do so quite consciously and for a very obvious, yet important, reason, one that Brontë herself explains. "Of late years [1840's], an abundant shower of curates has fallen..." she writes in opening her novel, but then adds, "But not of late years are we about to speak: we are going back to the beginning

of this century; late years – present years are dusty, sun-burnt, hot, arid; we will evade the noon, forget it in siesta, pass the mid-day in slumber, and *dream of dawn*”¹ (Brontë, 5). She compares the century to a day, with her own contemporary time being noon. This makes 1812 dawn, the very beginning of the day, of the era. She sets the novel in a time when the roots of her own present lie, a time when everything that exists in her present was only just being established. As I will explain in greater detail later, studying the past is a common method of examining and understanding one’s own present. In writing about Victorianists and neo-Victorianists, Mark Llewellyn says, “Is not the locus of their dual perspectives an approach to understanding the impact of the nineteenth century and its enduring legacy into the present?” (169). *Shirley* is not a neo-Victorian novel, and it looks back on a much a less distinctive period than that of the Victorian. Yet the general idea is the same. The purpose of looking backwards is to understand the impact of the past on the present, to seek out and find the legacy that still remains. Like an adopted child searching for his or her birth parents, a person, or a generation, has to understand where they come from before they can begin to comprehend where they are and where they’re going.

¹ Emphasis added.

Shirley Keeldar, the title character of *Shirley*, is spirited and seemingly determined to live life according to her own rules. She is quite unlike *Middlemarch's* proper Dorothea, who, though intelligent and hard-working, acts only within the frame allowed to her by her father and husband, or *David Copperfield's* gentle Agnes, who devotes herself to looking patiently after her father and fulfilling her duty as a daughter and, later, a wife. From the time Shirley arrives at Fieldhead and makes Caroline Helstone's acquaintance, she is a force to be reckoned with. Her own governess admits to Mr. Helstone, the local rector and guardian of Caroline, that Shirley's beliefs are different from her own opinion that political and religious matters are not for the female mind and that "it can scarcely be expected that the eager and young should hold the opinions of the cool and middle-aged" (Brontë, 169). Rather than following her governess's modest example, Shirley instead insists on being treated like a man, both in being given responsibilities and jobs normally given to men and in having her own voice heard on matters usually deemed inappropriate for ladies. Bowing to her fierceness and adamancy, the townspeople often treat her as a man rather than a young lady. For example, there is one evening when Robert Moore, a local mill owner, is expecting an attack on his mill. Mr. Helstone, who is going to the mill to

help him guard it, approaches Shirley and starts telling her how he cannot get the usual chaperone (Thomas, the clerk) to spend the night at his home. Anticipating what he will ask, Shirley says, "You want me as a gentleman – the first gentleman in Briarfield, in short, to supply your place, be master of the Rectory, and guardian of your niece and maids while you are away?" (Brontë, 280). Mr. Helstone replies, "Exactly, captain: I thought the post would suit you" (Brontë, 280). Not only is he allowing her to act as protector and guardian of his household for the evening, even going so far as to familiarize her with the weapons, he also addresses her as "Captain", a title often given to Shirley when she is acting in the position of a man.

There are times, however, when Shirley must assert herself to gain admittance to the exclusive men's sphere. For example, when she presents a plan for divvying up funds for charitable causes to the local reverends, Mr. Helstone makes a comment about her "female manoeuvres" (229), but she replies with, "You must regard me as Captain Keeldar to-day. This is quite a gentleman's affair – yours and mine entirely, Doctor...the ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp, and at their peril they speak, till we have settled the whole business" (Brontë, 229-230). Though both Caroline Helstone and Miss Ainley (an old maid to

whom Shirley originally gave the money and who is responsible for devising the original plan for putting the money to use) are present, Shirley sets herself apart from them and insists on being treated as a man with a right to a say in financial and official matters. By the end of the meeting, her plan has been agreed to and she is indeed being treated as Captain Keeldar; the meeting is ended with a fine supper and "*Captain Keeldar was complimented on *his* taste*" (231)². Shirley, then, establishes herself not as a fine young lady in Fieldhead - which, with her good looks, fine clothes, and wealth, it would have been all too easy to do - but rather as an intelligent and capable man.

This is highly unusual behavior for a woman in the nineteenth century. Women in the Victorian era were expected to be the "Angel in the House"; that is to say, they were to make the home a pleasant, peaceful place for their husbands to escape the rigors of the world. Tranquility and gentleness were prized traits, as were artistic and musical ability and anything else that would result in a soothing feminine presence. Conduct books like Reverend George Sumner Weaver's describe the ideal character for a woman: "It should be one great object in every young woman's life to study for a becoming and womanly

² Emphasis added.

behavior. Her manners should be agreeable; her conversation should be chaste and proper; her deportment should be dignified and easy; her regard for propriety and fitness in all she says and does should be made manifest; and in all respects her behavior should be such as becomes womanhood" (200). Certainly not all women were limited to this role – lower class women held select jobs, and some broke out of the framework of society altogether, like spiritualists – but the general standard for middle and upper class women remained intact through the end of the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that all Victorian women felt trapped and limited in their roles. Many were quite satisfied with this position: Caroline in *Shirley*, Cecily and Elizabeth in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, and Agnes in *David Copperfield* are literary examples of the numerous Victorian women who not only accepted this position but aspired to it, finding meaning and worth in their duties as wives and mothers. Queen Victoria herself, the leader of Great Britain and the namesake of the era, was a devoted wife and fulfilled her womanly duties happily. "Oh! To *feel* I was, and am, loved by *such* an Angel as Albert was *too great delight to describe!* He is *perfection*; perfection in every way...I will strive to make him feel as little as possible the great sacrifice he has made" the Queen writes (Helsing,

Sheets, & Veeder 64). "God knows how great my wish is to make this beloved being happy and contented" (Helsing, Sheets, & Veeder 65). Her dedication to being a good wife is undeniable; she devotes her life to it happily, as did many of her subjects. Women were valued and adored for the role they played in creating a nice home and raising the future generations of Great Britain, and many of them were quite content to greet their husbands with a smile and to welcome them home after a long day at work. Not all women were satisfied, but to choose to live outside the social order was to accept being criticized, frowned upon, and ostracized in addition to supporting oneself in a world that opened few doors to women, and so it was unusual for a woman to choose that lifestyle.³

This makes Shirley's actions and lifestyle all the more remarkable, at least on first inspection. She was independent, free-spirited, and strong. Her money buys her a privileged position which allows her to function, at least to some extent, on the same level as men, and she could potentially support herself for the rest of her life. For Brontë's readers, Shirley's freedom is their own; they, too, can walk in the woods with her, be bold

³ For example, Eliza Lynn Linton was a writer and reporter in the Victorian era who was married but lived apart from her husband, rejected Christianity, and was the first woman to be allowed into the British Museum. She defied all standards set for a Victorian woman and lived as she chose, yet her writings were exceptionally conservative and anti-feminist. As Helsing, Sheets, and Veeder write, "She spent her daring in the act of survival" (106). Eliza Linton is a woman who proves both that there were women who existed outside the social order and that it was extremely difficult to do so.

and daring with her, experience life without worrying about social constricts as she does. For a time, they could escape into the world of the novel and live as Shirley did, without risking the difficult life that would face them if they made the same choice in reality.

Even Shirley's more reserved sidekick Caroline seems to share some of her spunk. Early in the novel, she says, "I wish it [to have a profession] fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts" (Brontë 193). She even jokingly broaches the subject of becoming an apprentice to Robert Moore (her beloved cousin) in his cloth trade. Here, Caroline dreams of having something that is supposed to belong exclusively to men: a profession. Not only are women excluded from the professional sphere, but they are not even supposed to *want* it; it is unfeminine to do so. Yet Caroline does – she believes that it would distract her from things like unrequited love and loneliness and, essentially, take the place of a relationship in her life.

With emotions and experiences like these, Brontë reaches out to the young female readers in her audience. Shirley and Caroline are two adolescent girls on the brink of adulthood and they are facing the universal problems brought on by love and developing sexuality. The

driving force behind all of their actions in the book is love: Caroline wants a job to take her mind off of Robert, she cares for him when he is injured, spends her time pining for him and falls gravely ill when she thinks all hope of being with him is lost. Shirley, too, is driven by love to turn away potential suitors and remain single because she is waiting for Louis. They are consumed with the possibility of love – it is the sole acceptable outlet for their growing sexuality. Shirley and Caroline channel all of their burgeoning desires into their devotion to their respective crushes. Though far from explicit, there are hints at what the girls want, what they truly desire. Every touch from Robert and Louis is exciting, every glance treasured, every word exchanged worth a thousand from any other acquaintance. One small example is the way Brontë describes Robert on Caroline's behalf near the novel's close: "this face, potent in the majesty of its traits, shed down on her hope, fondness, and delight" (536). Robert is hopeful, seeing as he is about to propose to Caroline, but the lyrical language, the adoration in the description is obvious, and it is all coming from Caroline's perspective. Even the use of the word "potent" has its own implications. She wants him, *desires* him, melts into his embrace like it is the one thing that has been missing from her life.

Shirley's connection with Eve (which will be discussed later in the paper) is another symbol of burgeoning sexuality. According to the Bible, Eve eats the forbidden fruit and brings original sin on herself and Adam, which makes them aware of their sexuality. Shirley's connection with Eve implies the same developing awareness in herself. Brontë exploits Shirley's and Caroline's love lives and their feelings to connect with her readers – she writes characters to whom they can relate, with whom they have the shared experience of growing up, longing for love, and coming to terms with their sexuality.

For example, early in the novel, Caroline visits Robert with the hope of receiving a warm greeting, similar to the familiarity and affection Robert showed her the night before. She is a naïve child with high hopes, a wishful heart, and a crush – something not at all foreign to teenage girls in the 1850's, or even today, for that matter. But she is cruelly disappointed; all affability is gone from his demeanor and she is heartbroken (also a familiar feeling). Then the narrator pointedly stops the novel and lectures the reader, saying that a man could ask for explanation of such a dramatic change in behavior but a woman must hold her tongue. “You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the

gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time...the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob" (Brontë 90). This passage is blatantly aimed at young girls, offering them advice on how to deal with unrequited love. Brontë uses Caroline's experiences to reach out to her intended audience and make a connection with them and the readers, in turn, can take away a feeling of empathy and the sense they are not the only ones experiencing such turmoil. When Caroline wishfully replaces a romantic relationship with the possibility of a profession, so, to, do her readers. At the very least, they can understand her desires and perhaps live vicariously through her and through Shirley's temporarily more successful attempts to escape the confines of womanhood.

However, neither Shirley nor Caroline is ultimately immune to the social pressures that face them. For example, when Shirley's uncle tries to pressure her to marry Sir Philip Nunnely, she is adamant in her position, but not untouched: "I am sick at heart with all this weak trash" (466) she says to Mr. Sympson. She is fierce in holding her ground because she must be; otherwise she will be crushed. But her constant readiness for battle does not come without some measure of strain on her mind and spirit, and she needs a place where the expectations and pressures of

society can't touch her, where she can find true respite and solace. For this, Shirley turns to nature.

Nature is both a religious presence and a maternal figure for Shirley. She turns to it when many others turn to God: for worship and belief in something larger than herself, for strength in hard times, for sanctuary. For example, about halfway through the novel, bells summon Shirley and Caroline to church, and they obediently go, but when they get there, Shirley is reluctant to go in and even Caroline doesn't put up much of a fight when Shirley wants to stay outside. Both girls prefer the quiet and solitude outside the church to the heat and crowd that awaits them inside. Shirley declares that she must stay outside and begins to speak reverently of Nature, comparing it to Eve: "Her robe of blue air spreads to the outskirts of the heath...under her breast I see her zone, purple like that horizon: through its blush shines the star of evening," (270). She soon sinks into a meditative state, doing nothing more than reverently enjoying the pleasure of a lovely day. In this case, she literally replaces religious worship with time in nature and names nature as the equivalent of the prominent Biblical figure, Eve, thus allowing nature to take the place of religion.

But nature also functions as a maternal figure for Shirley. Besides this initial comparison with Eve (who represents a maternal figure as well as religion), there is also a story told by Louis Moore, Shirley's tutor, which communicates this point. He talks of a young orphan girl (Eva) who lived amongst a group of hunters at an undetermined time (but clearly long ago). As the story progresses, Eva becomes more obviously a stand-in for Shirley. Eva is often forgotten by people, yet, like Shirley, she finds nurture in the natural world; it feeds her when she is hungry, comforts her when she suffers, and cradles her in its arms. "The green wilderness nurtures her, and becomes to her a mother: feeds her on juicy berry, on saccharine root and nut. There is something in the air of this clime which fosters life kindly" (406). After describing how nature parented the girl, the story goes on to tell of one particularly difficult night of Eva's existence, when she cried to the night sky, "Guidance – help – comfort – come!" (407). Then, most unexpectedly, an answer comes, "Eva!...I come: a Comforter" (408). The night sky responds to her plaintive cry, like God answering a prayer or a mother comforting her child, and the line between nature, religion, and parent becomes blurry.

It is significant that Shirley chooses to compare nature to the universal mother, Eve, rather than another Biblical figure. Adam, too, was

the root of life, but she does not mention him. Instead she finds the beauty of a woman in the color of the sky and the silhouette of the environs. "I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature. I love her...she is taking me into her bosom, and showing me her heart" (271) she says to Caroline. Her words spur Caroline to wish for her own mother, real enough but unknown to her, which only serves to reinforce the connection between nature and mother and to demonstrate that the same comfort, strength, love, and protection that Caroline dreams of in a mother is found for Shirley in nature. Nature, then, can be understood as Shirley's sanctuary. The Christian church that the community is centered around, that Caroline's uncle runs, is patriarchal, centered around God the *Father* and exclusively male leaders. As such, it would limit Shirley, banish her to traditional roles. Nature is her matriarchal alternative. It offers the comfort of a mother's arms with the solace of God and still grants her the freedom to develop her spirit and strength away from the demands of the world. It is this connection with nature and the breathing room it gives her that allows Shirley to become the independent and fierce young woman that she is.⁴

⁴ Though nature is not quite as significant a figure in Caroline's life as it is in Shirley's (for Caroline still holds out for her real mother and has a very strong faith in the Christian Church, and thus does not need to supplement these vacancies in her life to the same extent that Shirley does), Caroline also finds solace in nature, taking long walks through the woods to calm her mind and

Notably, nature is not *as* important to Caroline as it is to Shirley.

Caroline, too, takes pleasure in nature and enjoys the outdoors, but she remains loyal to the Christian church. It is Shirley who reveres it, and this difference between the two girls represents their deeper differences.

Caroline, living within the patriarchal structure, dreams of being like men, of having a profession, of having control. Shirley, on the other hand, reaches beyond that. She doesn't dream of being like men; she claims a position as their equal. Functioning within her own matriarchal system (at least in the early and middle parts of the novel), Shirley defies men and simultaneously takes her place beside them, granting herself permission rather than waiting for it (as Caroline does, in a sense, when she approaches Robert about an apprenticeship, even if she wasn't entirely serious about it). Shirley acknowledges this difference when she sets herself apart from Caroline in the meeting between them, Miss Ainley, and the reverends. This difference allows Shirley much greater personal independence, leaving her free to address men, behave around them, and interact with them in ways that her devoted friend Caroline is not.

Despite Shirley's great independence, it was far too risqué to end the novel by defying the status quo and letting Shirley remain single

even telling Robert at the end of the novel that she much prefers the natural beauty of the land to his dearest industrial dreams.

because of the message that it would send to readers. Like *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, which will be discussed later, this book was aimed at girls and young women, both because it is a novel (novels were looked down upon by men as frivolous reading and were written for women) and because of the subject matter. As Brontë's second novel, *Shirley* was published in 1849, in the heart of the Victorian era – a time when society expected young women of good standing (like Shirley and Caroline) to marry and devote their lives to being good wives and mothers.

Impressionable young girls were reading Brontë's work, girls who could easily latch onto an idea presented in the novel – even if it was meant as nothing more than a flight of fancy in a fictional work – and so Brontë had to end her story of brash and bold Shirley by marrying her off.

Consequently, people reading the book today have mixed feelings about it: some feel that it is a great feminist piece (which it is, to an extent, thanks to the character of Shirley) while others feel that the status quo is maintained because the girls are married off at the end.⁵ Importantly, though, today's readers can still find something in the novel to which they can relate, which is why it is still being read, studied, and written about over a century after its publication: we can still find points of relevance in

⁵ Based on the reader reviews from goodreads.com and the summation of critical reviews from enotes.com

it. For example, one reviewer wrote, “This is one of the books that you feel an emotional attachment with by the time you are done reading it,” (Rebekahjack) while another reviewer, leaving out specifics, writes that the part of the novel she identifies with most is “practically eerie in how much it was like something I felt not too long ago” (Melanie). The time gap is not enough to erase the emotional connections that readers can still form with these characters.

Young readers in the Victorian would have also seen the relevance in it, even more than today’s readers. As one modern reviewer put it, “Caroline Helstone lives according to the Victorian rulebook” (Starfish), the same metaphorical handbook to which Brontë’s original audience would have adhered. Shirley, too, ultimately lives out the life that most girls of that era would have, and in so doing she sets an example for them because she *chooses* that particular life over maintaining her independence, implying that it is not only the right thing but the preferable thing. Shirley chooses to marry, and she chooses to marry a domineering man at that – Louis Moore. The reader is made to understand that Shirley actually *wants* a man who can control her; she refuses to marry Sir Philip Nunnely because he would not be able to do so. ““I will accept no hand which cannot hold me in check””, she says, adding, ““When I promise to

obey, it shall be under the conviction that I can keep that promise: I could not obey a youth like Sir Philip. Besides, he would never command me: he would expect me always to rule...And I know full well, any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me''' (Brontë 461). Her resolution to marry whom she chooses, which at first seems to be a particularly feminist stance (in that she will not allow the course of her life to be decided by her uncle simply because he is a man and/or her guardian), actually ends up maintaining the status quo. If she had done as her uncle wished and married Sir Philip, there is no doubt that he would have acquiesced to everything Shirley wanted and decided, and he would have been nothing more than a figurehead while Shirley became the manager of the estate in every way that matters. But rather than having the upper hand in a marriage with a man like Sir Philip Nunnely, she becomes the "angel in the house" to Louis Moore, bowing down to his every wish and command. At the end of the novel, the narrator talks about Shirley and Caroline and says, "Mrs. Louis was the grandest, she always wore such handsome dresses" (541). She was the *model* wife – beautiful, feminine, smart, but entirely at Louis' beck and call. She signs over her estate to him, gives him complete control, gives up *her* control so that she can be a proper wife. Even Shirley could not escape the

destiny that awaited her, and the message wasn't missed by readers.

Women could escape their fates in Shirley's and Caroline's antics for awhile, but ultimately, they had to be reminded of where their futures lay, and so Brontë wrote a happy, *reasonable* ending for both her characters and her readers.

Shirley's and Caroline's futures, like Brontë's readers', lay inescapably in the home. On the night of their engagement, Robert talks dreamily to Caroline about his plans for the future, about how his mill will expand and take over the Hollow. Caroline is horrified at the suggestion of rooting up the copse and destroying the natural beauty of the land, but Robert's only response is, "The copse shall be firewood ere five years elapse" (540). In fact, he seems to take distinct pleasure in her horror, as if he is mightier than she (and nature) and has the power to defy them both. At the very end of the novel, the narrator describes the Hollow as it has become since the Moore brothers wed: "The other day I passed up the Hollow, which tradition says was once green, and lone, and wild; and there I saw the manufacturer's day-dreams embodied in substantial stone and brick and ashes – the cinder-black highway, the cottages, and the cottage-gardens; there I saw a mighty mill, and a chimney, ambitious as the tower of Babel" (541). In his quest to achieve

wealth and status, Robert Moore (together with his brother Louis) industrialized the whole area, destroying the natural beauty and serenity of the place. Notably, nature, and the land of Hollow, was very important to Shirley and Caroline, who loved it dearly. Yet it has been sacrificed by the brothers in order to develop the mill, meaning that Shirley's and Caroline's freedom and peace that they found in nature has been sacrificed in favor of the patriarchal society and the advancement of industry (of which, naturally, they cannot have a part). For Shirley in particular, nature was where she felt safe, happy, and free; it was the source of her independence. Now it has been torn down at the will of man, and Shirley's independence crumbles correspondingly (in fact, this description of the Hollow is written on the very day of Shirley's and Caroline's weddings). Their places in the world are shrinking as nature shrinks; there is no place for them in the industrial complex and they are left with no where to go (symbolically speaking) other than the home. Shirley and Caroline have been absorbed into their husbands' dreams and they, likewise, have been absorbed into their husbands' identities. They are no longer Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone. They are Mrs. Louis and Mrs. Robert.

Part 2

We take that ride on the mountaintop, falling into ourselves without trying to stop. I have only one rough moment. I'm a mermaid, rising from the sparkling sea, but when I look down, the water is my mother's face, tight and fearful. I'm suddenly afraid and wish I could stop. But in the next moment we're swept away to Felicity's tent. Our eyes are shining, our skin is rosy, our all-knowing smiles are back. Our bodies feel like luxurious sighs as we stand in the great hall, completely invisible.

Oh, God, the great and terrible beauty of it.

(Bray, Great and Terrible 334)

Gemma and her friends, Felicity, Ann, and Pippa, are teenagers living in Victorian England and are students at a finishing school meant to groom them into desirable wives. In the scene quoted to open this section, Gemma is narrating what she and her friends experience when they enter the realms, a magical world which Gemma has the power to access. The girls had been sitting in Felicity's tent in the Great Hall of Spence Academy (their finishing school), prepared to spend the evening as they do most others: gossiping about meaningless things and doing a lot of nothing. Frustrated with the boring activities designated to fill their time and looking for an escape, they decide to summon the door to the realms, where they revel in their freedom and experience a tangible escape from their very limited lives as budding proper English ladies. When they return to the Great Hall, they carry with them enough magic from the realms to make them invisible, meaning they are free to play pranks on their teachers and classmates, free from the restrictions which would steady their hands were they visible. In a small way, this is the beginning of the girls' burgeoning freedom; when they summon the door, they are making a conscious decision to escape and are directly subverting the rules, and what they bring back from the realms allows them to do things that would not otherwise be possible.

A Great and Terrible Beauty is a neo-Victorian novel, one of many pieces which portrays Victorian life as a means of understanding and commenting on both the past and the present. The term neo-Victorian refers to all those novels which are written in the present day (or after the Victorian era) yet were still set during Queen Victoria's reign. There are many sub-genres within neo-Victorian fiction, including, but not limited to, realism (novels that do their best to portray an accurate portrait of life in the Victorian era), steampunk (novels that combine trademarks of the Victorian era with fantastical or science-fiction elements), allohistories (novels that re-imagine a significant moment in history and try to discern how the world would be a different place if that had been reality), etc. Bray is one of those authors who choose to set their novels in the past (as is Brontë, though of course her novel is not a piece of neo-Victorian fiction) - the incorporation of magic and the realms into the lives of four Victorian teenagers places *A Great and Terrible Beauty* as a piece of steampunk fiction. What is interesting about Bray's and Brontë's choice to set their works in their respective pasts is *why* they choose to use this method. The distance is necessary to be able to critique societal structures when writing on a topic that is already so personal (for both women), but Bray's specific choice of the Victorian era over any other is interesting.

Mark Llewellyn offers the definition of neo-Victorian fiction as “those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period...or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of the period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” (165).⁶ *A Great and Terrible Beauty* paints a very detailed image of what life was like in the Victorian era so that it can go on to employ the strict class and gender systems as a contrast to the vibrant world of the realms. For example, early on in the novel, Bray jumps in with a detailed description of Victoria Station in London: “Down at the far end of the train, the third-class passengers climb off in a thick tumble of arms and legs. Porters hurry to carry luggage and parcels for the first-class passengers. Newsboys hold the day’s papers in the air as far as their arms will stretch, screeching the most enticing headlines” (*Great and Terrible* 24). The description goes on, vividly painting in the reader’s mind a picture of the platform. Already the author is commenting on Victorian society, contrasting the disorganized people from the third-class who are getting off in a “thick tumble of arms and legs” to the more austere and elegant first-class passengers, who, instead of exiting as a mob, are offered every assistance

⁶ Examples of neo-Victorian fiction include *Fanny by Gaslight*, which uses prostitution as a lens through which to view the Victorian, *Possession*, and *A French Lieutenant’s Wife*.

in disembarking smoothly (24). Importantly, Gemma is one of the first-class passengers, an upper middle-class young lady, meaning that she is both privileged and cursed: she has the opportunity to lead a serene, luxurious life as the wife of a wealthy man but, on the downside, she is expected to lead a serene, luxurious life as the wife of a wealthy man.

The same caste system is recognized when Tom, Gemma's brother, drops her off at Spence and says, "'Now, it is very important that you conduct yourself in a manner befitting your station while at Spence. It's fine to be kind to the lesser girls, but remember that they are not your equals'" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 37). Here again, only now in specific relation to Gemma, the importance of class, of propriety, and of status is highlighted; as an upper middle class girl, there are certain expectations for her behavior and her lifestyle, and that includes keeping the lower classes at a distance, lest she be mistaken for one of them. Beyond physical descriptions of Victorian London and a recognition of the harsh class system, the author also largely depends on depicting the gender roles of the Victorian era as a means to build her story. One minute example is the moment when Tom offers Gemma's friend Ann some cakes "and Ann, who has never refused a morsel of food in her life, declines as a well-born, properly bred lady should, lest she seem a glutton" (Bray, *Great*

and Terrible 306). While refusing cake is not exactly a momentous incident, the point is that Ann is editing herself, changing what she would normally do to fit into the image of a proper lady. Accepting the cake would mark her as a glutton; turning down food is just another item on the long list of things ladies were expected to do. Using the Victorian framework, then, Bray is able to describe the rigid restrictions to which her main characters are subject and thus comment on the role of women by contrasting the characters' strict Victorian lives with the freedom they will find in the realms.

Yet while Bray places her novel in the Victorian era, the "neo" aspect of the novel comes into play in the characters' thoughts, ideas, and choices. Gemma and her friends, quite notably, do not fall into the usual mold that the other girls at Spence Academy do. In one memorable scene, all of the girls are in an art class and, despite the teacher's instructions, Gemma and her friends wish to do something other than paint a still life. Gemma wants to paint freestyle; Felicity would like to sculpt. Due to their rather persistent requests, the teacher allows them to do as they wish. Yet another student, Cecily, pipes up with, "Assembly Day is only two weeks away, and I won't have anything decent to show my family when they arrive" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 265). Her like-minded friend Martha

adds, "Cecily's quite right...I don't care what *they* want. I can't show my family some primitive sketch of a cave wall. They would be appalled" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 265). Cecily and Martha are, so to speak, the still lives, the model of what a Victorian-era girl from a good family should be. They live as their parents, indeed as society, dictates, questioning nothing, changing nothing. They are stagnant. Gemma and her friends, on the other hand, are the freestyle paintings. They choose to find their own paths in life rather than copy the model laid out for them. They reject the Victorian ideals of protecting personal and family reputation and status above all else and instead embrace the much more modern idea of pursuing their own individual paths to happiness and fulfillment, whatever that may mean.

Bray's use of the neo-Victorian to simultaneously examine both the Victorian and the present is representative of the role of neo-Victorian literature. Through neo-Victorian literature, we attempt to negotiate an understanding of the past and our relationship with it and also to place ourselves in the "historical continuum" (Llewellyn 173), to understand where we fit in and why. In his article, Llewellyn astutely writes that "we are looking backward in a more literal sense, attempting to rediscover the ideals of the modern" (174). Essentially, we write about the past, we

study the past, and we interpret the past in an attempt to find in it the roots of our own world and come to an understanding of the society we live in.⁷ In her writings, Bray is encouraging her readers to take a closer look, to see if there is anything to which they can relate in her description of the Victorian. She wants to examine both what is the same and what is different, what has changed.

We also look to the Victorian because it offers us the chance to study many of our societal structures from an objective perspective. “The Victorian and the neo-Victorian offer the simultaneous possibilities of proximity and distance...[the Victorians] offer the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today” writes Llewellyn (175). By studying the Victorian era as a way of understanding ourselves, we are offered both “proximity and distance” (175) – proximity in that Victorian ideals and beliefs are the roots for our own, and as such we can find in them great resonance, but distance in that the Victorian is not, in fact, our era, and so we can be more critical, more objective in observing the Victorian than in studying and passing judgment on ourselves. Neo-Victorian novels, then, are popular because

⁷ Dinah Birch examines one such root in comparing today’s educational system to religion in the Victorian era. She argues that people today work towards academic success for the same reason Victorians attended church regularly and showed devoutness: to indicate conformity to societal expectations.

they re-imagine the past and bring readers to a new understanding of a world that is the basis of our own.

A Great and Terrible Beauty is a study of womanhood, or rather, of the experience of becoming a woman, and this is something that doesn't change over time. Certainly, the setting changes the circumstances, and perhaps even the manifestation of certain problems, but other things (a desire for independence from one's parents, for acceptance from peers, budding sexuality) remain eternally the same, making such a transition the perfect subject to be broached in a novel such as this. Present day readers can relate to Gemma because of their own similar emotions, making the specific experience of being a *Victorian* girl more relatable and accessible. They can understand the unique challenges that Gemma faces because of the simultaneous presence of universal challenges. This universality of the experience of being a woman is what makes the Victorian era the perfect place for Bray to negotiate an understanding of womanhood. The limitations then imposed on ladies make their status in society and expectations in life painfully clear, its relationship with the present is close enough to still have relevance, and it is far enough away to critique and examine without impediment.

In the beginning of *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Gemma is struggling in more ways than one. She is fighting to come to terms with her mother's death, which is itself an issue of mystery: Gemma witnesses her death in a vision, the first sign she's ever had of the magic that lives within her, and she cannot understand either the circumstances surrounding her mother's death, which included her being attacked by an unidentifiable creature, or the vision that allowed her to see it. She cannot reconcile the circumstances surrounding the incident with anything rational; she cannot even confide in anyone about it. Guilt fills her when she remembers her last words to her mother: "'I don't care if you come home at all'" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 9). She was unhappy in India before her mother's death and is even unhappier in London after it because her mother had so adamantly kept her away from England. Her brother finds her an unmanageable nuisance and her father is wasting away, his life taken over by grief and laudanum. "And I could only stand by, helpless and mute, the cause of it all," Gemma narrates. "The keeper of a secret so terrible it made me afraid to speak, scared that it would pour out of me like kerosene, burning everyone" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 23). She is trapped, weak, at a loss to figure out where she stands or what to do next.

At the same time, she is terrified by her newly emerging power, which is parallel to her burgeoning sexuality. Within the first few pages of the novel, Gemma meets Kartik, a young Indian boy, in a marketplace while she is out with her mother. "He isn't much older than I am, probably seventeen if a day, with brown skin, a full mouth, and the longest eyelashes I have ever seen. I know I'm not supposed to find Indian men attractive, but I don't see many young men and I find I'm blushing in spite of myself" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 7). This experience with a young man, the first she has seen in a long time and quite probably the first she has seen as a young woman rather than a child, is rapidly followed by the first signs of her newly emerging power: she experiences her first vision, which quite traumatically shows her mother's death, just hours after her run-in with Kartik. The parallel between her power and her sexuality continues throughout the novels; as Gemma struggles with learning to control her new power, she is simultaneously confronted with dealing with her growing feelings for Kartik and, even more frighteningly, the sensual dreams that allow her to explore a part of herself that had previously been entirely hidden to her. For example, she describes one of her dreams as follows:

“I’m dreaming of Kartik again. A hungry dream. Our mouths are everywhere at once. The kissing is feverish and hard. His hands rip at the fabric of my nightgown, exposing the skin of my neck. His lips rake the curve there, taking small nips that almost hurt but mostly inflame. We’re rolling together, a wheel of hands and tongues, fingers and lips. A pressure builds inside me till I think I might come apart from it. And when I feel I can’t take another moment of it, I wake with a start. My nightgown is damp against my body. My breath is shallow. I place my hands rigidly beside me and do not move for a very long time, until at last I sleep and do not dream” (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 328).

The dream begins with an unconscious exploration of her attraction to Kartik. Gemma is kissing Kartik as she has never kissed a boy in real life, exploring, in her sleep, that emerging part of herself that is attracted to Kartik as she is both unable and unwilling to do in her waking hours. Here, in her dreams, she is free to explore a part of herself which would not be welcome in Victorian society, much as she explores her magic in the realms, a place where societal limitations cannot touch her. As soon as she awakes from the dream and has consciously returned to a place

where a certain level of propriety is demanded, she responds with fear to the realization of the impure dreams. She clamps her hands tightly to her sides and lies perfectly still as though she can repress these new feelings and desires if only she can keep her body rigid and immobile. Similarly, at the first signs of her power, she does her best to pretend that it does not exist because she is equally as unequipped to handle that as she is to handle womanhood. She is, then, struggling to come to terms not only with what she has experienced but who she is becoming, both as a woman and as a powerful worker of magic.

Yet while her nights are interspersed with surprising dreams and her days are sometimes interrupted by a visit from Kartik, her more common and more explored struggle is with her power.⁸ Before her vision, she was entirely innocent of the existence of her power, and even after the magic starts to show itself, she has no idea what it is and cannot understand why she is experiencing these strange visions. The first time Gemma is pulled into a vision she is certain she's dying. As her power grows, so does her confusion and fear. One night, soon after arriving at Spence, she sneaks out to the caves on the school grounds with Felicity,

⁸ Gemma's power initially allows her to see visions of events, such as her mother's death. As she grows stronger, she learns to control these visions, and her power also expands to allow her to enter the realms (a different and awe-inspiring world) and to access the magic that is a part of the realms and bring it back with her.

Ann, and Pippa. While reading Mary Dowd's diary, they come across a passage that speaks of the magic of the realms and decide to try to create some of their own. The other girls decide that they have felt a tingling of sorts, probably nothing more than the effects of the whiskey they've been drinking, but Gemma experiences something very different. "The air sparkles with random bursts of light. Suddenly, it's as if the cave is on fire, flames leaping up, so hot I [Gemma] can't catch my breath. 'No!' Using all my strength, I break the circle and find myself back in the cave while Pippa, Ann, and Felicity look at me, stunned....My heart's beating so hard I fear it will leap from my chest. I force a calm I don't feel" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 173). Even this small instance of magic shocks and scares her, and the more her power shows itself, the more Gemma fears her own abilities. In another instance, she unintentionally drags Pippa into a vision with her, and comes back to reality to find Pippa seizing uncontrollably on the floor. Watching over Pippa that night, she thinks, "I'm afraid to sleep myself. Afraid I'll see Pippa's terrified face as she toppled into my stupid bloody vision. The fear and guilt have me exhausted. Too tired to keep the tears back, I bury my face in my hands and weep, for Pippa, for my mother, my father, everything" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 189). As in the earlier instance of magic, which left her

shaking and trembling in front of her mocking friends, Gemma is expressing the fear that the surges of her power bring with them, the uncertainty and pain that they wreak on her life. At this point in the novel, Gemma is completely unsure of herself, at a loss to figure out her place in life and scared of her own incredible abilities, her developing person, what her future may hold and what her past certainly does.

But as the novel (and the series) progresses, Gemma's spirit grows stronger. She learns more about her power through the diary of former Spence student Mary Dowd, which guides her and gives her instruction. She begins to seek out her power and use it intentionally. She discovers that she can enter the realms, a delightful place where the girls can roam through a garden bathed in an everlasting sunset, turn leaves into jewels, and have their dearest wishes and wildest dreams come true. Ann becomes a beautiful girl with a breathtaking singing voice, Pippa finds true love when she is courted by a knight who dotes on her, and Felicity, who wants nothing more than to be fierce and unstoppable, becomes skilled at archery. Gemma, who wants to understand herself, is reunited with her mother and begins to learn her true past and the roots of the magic that lives in her. The girls, in short, begin to explore their hidden

desires, test their limits, find their strength, and discover what makes them happy.

In some ways, the girls' experience in the realms is very reminiscent of Shirley's relationship with nature. While no *actual* magic awaits her there, she, like Gemma and her friends, glories in the anonymity of being in a place where nothing is expected of her, where there is no one to expect anything from her. Shirley finds guidance in nature from her mother Eve just as Gemma is able to speak to and get advice from the incarnation of her mother, to whom she can speak in the realms. While Shirley revels in nature, however, Gemma and her friends are a bit more dependent on the realms, and soon the girls come to rely on the realms as an escape from their rigidly structured daily lives and the bleak futures that await them.

For example, there is one day that leaves them all in equal misery: the day the girls' families came to visit at Spence. It doesn't start out terribly. While Gemma doesn't particularly enjoy her time with her family, Ann, who is orphaned and having tea them, enjoys the afternoon, that is, at least until Cecily blows her cover and reveals she is the scholarship student, the poor one. Felicity is excited to see her father, until she gets a note saying that he isn't coming, and Pippa, last but far

from least, finds herself engaged by the end of the day, to a middle-aged man who her parents have decided she will marry. It is enough to drive Gemma to desperate measures: they go to the realms, but it's not enough, and Gemma decides to bring the magic back into the real world. "Maybe it's the thought of lovely Pippa, married off...[or] imagining Ann squelching her voice to work for pompous aristocrats...or Felicity trying to hold back her tears...Whatever the reason, I'm thinking now of a way out, of bringing the magic back from the realms" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 315). Gemma presents the realms as the girls' only hope of a life that *they* would like to lead, of Ann being able to use her voice, of Pippa falling in love. Without the realms and the magic they offer, they are trapped on a seemingly unalterable path to a predestined future.

For the lives they led in the real world were largely out of their control. The Victorian era was a time of great change and development during which the role of the female began to be reconstructed. In the early nineteenth century, life for middle-class women was essentially predetermined: they were born and raised to be the "Angel in the House"; that is, to be the moral compass of the family, to provide love and comfort to their husbands and nurturing to their children, and, most importantly, not to step beyond that limited role. But as the Victorian era progressed,

feminism became an increasingly strong movement as women began to be unsatisfied with the lot they had drawn in life. In the 1880's and even more so in the 1890's, the idea of the New Woman began to take root and grow. "This new generation of (mostly middle-class) emancipated women focused their critical look on the double gender standard, fought for women's right to systematic higher education, worked to penetrate male middle-class professions, and became notorious for their unflinching outspokenness on various intellectual questions" writes Iveta Jusová (1). This is true, in theory: the most extreme proponents of the New Woman movement did indeed embody this description. In practice, however, the real "New Woman", as we think of her today, acted on a much smaller scale; she followed what others preached. The "New Woman" wore more practical clothes, smoked in public, rode bicycles, and sometimes refused to fall into the traditional marriage scenario. She penetrated the workforce, pursuing (certain) professional careers, usually as a writer, teacher, nurse, clerk, or the like; for example, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of female teachers in Great Britain more than doubled.⁹ The New Woman was remarkable for stepping outside of

⁹ Information and statistics are drawn from *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* and *The New Woman and the Empire*.

the domestic sphere, and, more drastically, for stepping outside of the role of being society's moral compass and pursuing her own interests.

The *fin de siècle*, however, did not mark a sudden and complete shift into a new understanding of women, but rather was just the beginning of the long process of recreating the conceptualization of women, a process that would continue into the next century and is still going on today. The New Woman was, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, just beginning to be created and, as Richardson and Willis wrote, was then "on the cusp...between fiction and fact, [and as such] her status was fiercely debated in prose and parlours" (1). It was a complicated period, with much contradiction and argument over which theory of femininity was "right", and the argument for the New Woman was only one voice in the crowd. For example, while supporters of the New Woman movement argued that the changing economic and social climate *required* women to move out of the domestic sphere and broaden their traditional roles, opponents argued that the New Woman was the *cause* of the problem in the first place and so should not be encouraged to become the norm. Elizabeth Linton, a well-known writer, was a staunch opponent of the New Woman movement, as was Hugh Stutfield, who tried to discredit New Woman writings so that they wouldn't be considered valid opinions.

Henry Maudsley, an influential psychologist, argued for innate mental differences between men and women and, despite dissenting opinions from pro-feminist scientists, was still largely believed by the general public and contributed to the continuation of the idea of separate spheres for men and women throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Jusová, 9). In light of all these opposing opinions and ongoing debates concerning the role of women, the *fin de siècle* should be understood as a period of transition, one where neither complete emancipation nor complete confinement was accepted by all as the proper course of action.

There is, then, no clear-cut description of what precisely the role of the female was in the latter part of the Victorian era. What is certain is that it was a period of changing norms, of the development of the role of women by the free-thinking and the progressive and a corresponding resistance to such change by conservatives. Gemma and her friends were teenagers during this period of change, undergoing a similar transition in their own lives. They sat, as Richardson and Willis put it, on the very same cusp as the New Woman, hovering somewhere between childhood and adulthood, between obscurity and recognition, and between falling into the traditional Victorian role and learning to be free of that limitation.

They were in just as much turmoil as the era itself, trying to balance expectations and external forces with what they believed and wanted for themselves.

It must be noted, however, that putting the New Woman philosophies into action was easier for some groups than others. Poorer women, for example, were far more free to pursue work outside the home, mostly because the income they could potentially offer was desperately needed. Gemma and her friends (with the exception of Ann, whose aunt and uncle had nevertheless already planned a life for her as a nurse to their children) were wealthy girls, and as such, the beliefs that ruled their lives (that is, those held by their families and the staff at Spence Academy), were far from the progressive New Woman ideas, but rather were almost exclusively conservative. They were, after all, students at a finishing school meant to polish girls to make them suitable wives for upstanding gentlemen, and their families were, therefore, most likely not particularly receptive to upsetting their outlook on the role of women. For example, when the girls mess up during a dance lesson with their headmistress, Mrs. Nightwing, she says to them, ““May I remind you, ladies, that this is not a game? The London season is very serious business. It is your chance to prove yourselves worthy of the duties that

will be imposed upon you as wives and mothers" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 181-182). This is what the girls at the school were brought up to expect: a proper London season, during which they would parade around in front of eligible bachelors to advertise themselves, followed, if all went well, by a marriage proposal by one of these said bachelors, a wedding, and a comfortable, simple life. Their futures after that would be as wives and mothers, and they were only at school to learn how to make themselves more appealing to men so that they might successfully fulfill those roles. This is the future that Gemma and her friends were raised to look forward to, the one that they are expected to fulfill unquestioningly, and the one that they must ultimately evade if they ever hope to build their own lives.

But this was a time of change, and every now and then a little bit of freedom reached the girls. For example, in *The Sweet Far Thing*, the final book in Bray's trilogy, the girls are afforded the special opportunity to ride bicycles. This is particularly notable because few people then believed in physical exercise for girls.¹⁰ Yet the girls of Spence Academy dress in special costumes, ones that do not involve skirts at all (scandalous enough in itself for Elizabeth, one of the girls at Spence, who is so

¹⁰ The authors of *The Woman Question: Defining Voices* make a point of noting how remarkable it was that, just two or three decades before the idea of the "New Woman" began to take root, John Ruskin, a well-known writer, donated time and money to a school which offered physical as well as literary and artistic education to girls.

uncomfortable in the outfit that she hides and refuses to try the bicycles), and then try to ride. They find it wildly exciting; for most of them bicycling is something that has never been tried before and is a novel and thrilling experience. Gemma describes her ride as follows: "I am mad for bicycling! It is a most marvelous sport! The wind rips my hat from my head...This is freedom. I feel the turning of the wheels deep in my belly, as if we are one machine, and I cannot fall" (Bray, *Sweet Far* 113). It is in points like these that Bray recognizes the loosening of the restrictions that bind the girls to a certain kind of lifestyle, but she simultaneously manages to communicate that they are still mainly ruled by traditional Victorian ideals.

For example, Gemma's brother, Tom, is drawn into the novel repeatedly to give voice to the dominant view, and early on in *A Great and Terrible Beauty* he says to Gemma, "A man wants a woman who will make life easy for him. She should be attractive, well groomed, knowledgeable in music, painting, and running a house, but above all, she should keep his name above scandal and never call attention to herself" (Bray 27). Women, or at least, *these* women (those sent to a finishing school), were expected to be picture perfect: beautiful and lovely on the surface, with nothing underneath. Gemma and her friends often find themselves in

trouble with their teachers, headmistress, and families for not being ladylike enough and for being too wild and uncontrollable. As one reviewer wrote, even the book cover becomes involved in creating the image of their lives: "The jacket, a photo of a young woman in a tightly laced corset and lacy camisole, bespeaks a steamy love story...but the costume is really a metaphor for the strictures against women of the period" (Zvirin). Despite the increasing influence of New Woman ideals, the lives led by Gemma and her friends are still largely ruled by traditional Victorian structures. Yet the little tastes of freedom the girls get are exhilarating and addictive, and as their need for more freedom grows, Libba Bray offers them the realms as an escape from the limitations imposed upon them.

The realms are a different world which Gemma has the power to enter. It is incredible both because of its beauty and because of the power the girls hold there – the possibilities that await them. In the realms the girls can have things that would never be possible for them in 1895's London, not just magic but also real responsibility and real freedom. "Eventually I realized that because the girls were so powerless in this world, they needed control elsewhere" said Bray in an interview (Paolini). Before Gemma discovers her full abilities, Felicity suggests that the girls'

sneak out to the caves on the school grounds at night in order to have a place where they can play by their own rules (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 134). Soon, however, the girls discover Gemma's magic and the caves become nothing more than their habitual intermediate place between Spence Academy and the realms. The realms, then, become the girls' true "elsewhere" (Paolini), embodying their desire for a place where no one can tell them what to do or how to act; they are free to frolic, to voice their wildest dreams, to make mistakes and learn from them. "We wear garlands in our hair, tell naughty jokes, laugh and shout, confess our fears and our hopes. We even belch without restraint. There's no one around to stifle us. No one to tell us what we think and feel is wrong. It isn't that we do what we want. It's that we're allowed to want at all" Gemma narrates (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 284). Within the realms, the girls were free to grow, to develop and mature and test their own limits in a way they never would have been able to outside their sanctuary. They were, in short, free to become New Women in every sense of the phrase, to break free of the old limitations to which the adults who guided them clung and embrace everything they had ever dreamed of. "We are new girls for a new world" Felicity unwittingly prophesizes the day after their first trip into the realms, foreshadowing the ultimate effect that being able to enter

the realms will have on her and her friends' lives (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 263). They will indeed become new girls, New Women, with the courage to lead their lives as they see fit. Gemma's mother, the ghost of whom Gemma finds in the realms, describes the realms to her daughter as "A world between worlds. A place where all things are possible...It's where the Order [the group of women with the magic] came to reflect, to hone their magic and themselves, to come through the fire and be made new" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 254). She means that it is a world between the living and the dead, but Gemma and her friends employ it as a means of navigating their adolescence, as a world between childhood and adulthood. Like the Victorian era itself, which bridges the gap between the medieval and the modern and was entirely transitional, the realms become the in-between place for Bray's characters to develop from powerless girls into self-assured women. Away from the structures that would attempt to create the girls, this is where they come to create themselves.

The changes that the girls' experiences bring about in them are marked at intervals by the action of running. Early in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Gemma runs through Spence, in a rush to get Mary's diary from her room, but collides with the housekeeper, who admonishes her:

“‘Sorry? Aye, and you should be...Carrying on in that way, galloping like a stallion about to meet the gelder’s knife! Now, I ask you, is that any way for a proper young lady to conduct ‘erself? Hmm? Now wot would Missus Nightwing [the headmistress] say if she was to see you makin’ such a spectacle o’ yerself?’” (Bray 105). Running is unladylike behavior; it is characteristic of children or animals and is supremely inappropriate for a “proper young lady”, and so Gemma is admonished for it (105). Importantly, she is still in a *position* to be scolded for unladylike behavior; she is still subject to the conduct rules society imposes on her.

Four pages later, Gemma is in the forest and reading an entry in Mary’s diary that describes one of her visits to the realms: “I ran, fast as a deer, my legs powerful and strong, and I was filled with a joy I cannot describe” (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 109). Free of the boundaries of society in the realms, the impropriety of running is lost and becomes instead a great joy for Mary, who lived earlier in the Victorian era. Perhaps it is an even greater joy *because* it is forbidden back in London; her ability to run in the realms is a tangible reminder that she is no longer bound by any rules, that here, she is her own master. When Gemma discovers how to control her power and brings her friends into the realms with her, they, like Mary before them, run and frolic freely. Running becomes even

further inextricably connected to the magic when her urge to run causes Gemma's power to draw her into a vision: "How I'd love to get away from here and be someone else for a while in a place where no one knows or expects certain things from me...The need to run has somehow taken over. The familiar tingling is back, pulling me down deep [into a vision] before I can get control of it" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 185-186). At the moment when she most desires to escape her life at finishing school, to be free of it all, the power overwhelms Gemma and shows her another world, and, though she doesn't know it yet, another choice, the choice to become more than most believe she is destined to be.

The very last lines of *A Great and Terrible Beauty* narrate Gemma's thoughts: "A deer...I run after her, not really giving chase. I'm running because I can, because I must. Because I want to see how far I can go before I have to stop" (403). She's in London now, in the woods near Spence Academy, but Gemma still runs, even though she is forbidden to do so in this world. Though she has not consciously acknowledged it yet, the rules no longer apply to her; she is already on her way to becoming a New Woman. She has discovered an incredible power within herself, found freedom within the realms, and now she is discovering how to carry that freedom into her own world. At the start of the novel, she

couldn't run; she got in trouble for it. Then she discovered the joy of running in the realms, with no one to catch her, to stop her, and finally she sprints through the forest on the grounds of Spence Academy, chasing after a deer with no concern of getting caught. She might, but it doesn't matter anymore – she is beyond reprimand, beyond making herself smaller to fit into someone else's idea of who she should be. She needs to see how far her independence stretches, how strong she is on her own, how far she can go before she has to stop.

In order to give Gemma the breathing room she needed to grow, Libba Bray penned the fictional world of the realms. The girls find an enchanting garden and are lucky enough to have the chance to do things they never dreamed of. They can speak loudly, get dirty, and be disgusting; they can also be stronger, more beautiful, and more talented than they ever hoped. Gemma can speak to the spirit of her mother, which helps her to understand herself and her past. Felicity learns archery, Ann can sing in the most lovely way, and Pippa finds true love. The realms become not only the girls' escape, but also the place where they go to find something greater than themselves, to learn freely all that they wish they could learn in their own world.

While the realms are a product of Bray's imagination and therefore entirely fictional (barring some unknown and rather incredible coincidence that defies every law of physics known to mankind), the girls' use of it is, in some ways, reminiscent of a very real practice that was rampant in Victorian London: spiritualism. Bray exaggerates the experience of spiritualism and uses that as her basis for the supernatural ability that she offers to Gemma. For example, when Gemma is first discovering and trying to understand her supernatural power, she and her friends sneak out at night and frequent the caves on the school grounds, where they share secrets, form a bond, and read the diary of Mary Dowd. Inspired by their reading about the door of light which Mary and her friend Sarah can make appear and the magic which they have, the girls decide to hold a séance to try to create some of their own magic (Bray, *Great and Terrible*, 171-173). They join hands and try to call on the magic which, except for Gemma, they have only read about up until now.

This is similar to some of the practices common in spiritualism, particularly a séance (which holds a slightly different function in spiritualism than it does for the girls). People who believe in spiritualism believe, amongst other things, that the dead reside in their own dimension (for lack of a better word) and, under the right circumstances, can

communicate with the living. The most common way to communicate with the spirit world was through a medium. The mediums would hold a séance, which would allow them to mentally enter the world of the dead, speak to the spirits, and bring messages back to the world of the living (which is similar, though not identical, to Gemma's powers). For example, in the novel *Affinity*, Sarah Waters employs spiritualism to allow her characters to escape from both the real and metaphorical prisons of a jail cell and the home. Selina, one of the main characters, is a medium (she attempts to communicate with the world of the dead and pass messages onto the living). Both she and Margaret, the other main character, are imprisoned by the actual confinement of a prison cell and by societal expectations, respectively, and ultimately escape by "blurring the boundaries between the spiritual and the material worlds. Selina achieves this by reproducing the potential subversion of her spiritualist activities in the confined limits of her prison cell" (Arias 256); that is, she chooses to exist outside of the framework of Victorian society by participating in questionable behavior. Even though she is imprisoned for her deviant behavior, she continues to practice spiritualism within the prison and uses this as a mental escape from her physical confinement.

Yet Gemma and her friends quickly move beyond this simple practice; as soon as Gemma discovers that she can enter the realms, the séance stance (the girls' sitting in a circle, holding hands, calling on the magic) becomes nothing more than a gateway to what is beyond, to what awaits them on the other side of the door of light that they use to enter the realms. Spiritualists tried to talk to spirits in another world, Waters' Selina communicates with another world. Gemma and her friends, on the other hand, actually *enter* another world, and so the escape that she and her friends experience is much more tangible than Selina's, more challenging, more exhilarating, and more influential on their lives and their characters.

Besides the girls holding a séance (of sorts) to call upon mystical power, there are other similarities to spiritualism to be found in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*: they can speak to *some* spirits of the dead (they can talk to and see Gemma's mother and, after her death, Pippa, as well as some others who have died) and they can help them to cross over, to leave the realms (which are a kind of purgatory for the deceased) and move on to the world of the dead, where they can be at rest. Gemma even carries a message from a wandering soul that she meets in the realms to his brother in the real world, truly taking on the role of a medium in this capacity.

But the realms offer the girls the opportunity to be much more than just mediums.

Mediums were limited to strictly temporary and strictly mental escapes. Gemma's and her friends' escape, however, is neither.

"Spiritualist mediums (who were mostly women) broke down societal norms and rules when holding séances, successfully finding in the spiritualist circle an outlet for transgressive behaviour" wrote Arias (262).

If Gemma and her friends can be understood as mediums, then when they break down the barrier between the real world and the realms, they also break down the societal norms which bind them in their everyday lives.

However, while Arias means that the simple act of breaking these boundaries *is* the "transgressive behaviour", as it was for Waters' Selina, that is only the beginning for Bray's characters (262). Once they break the boundary between worlds, they gain entrance to a place where the unacceptable is not only accepted but reveled in. Take, for example, the girls' total sense of abandon and freedom in the following scene: "'It's time to dance!' Felicity takes both my hands in hers, twirling me around...We're picking up speed, our hair flying, hands tight on each other's wrists. 'Whatever you do, don't let go!' Felicity shrieks, as our bodies lean back in defiance of gravity till we're nothing more than a great

blur of color on the landscape" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 282). Once they have broken the boundary between the worlds and, metaphorically speaking, the boundaries of their lives, they continue on, cross over to the other side. They enter the realms, where they are free to be youthful and exuberant, to *live*, and thus they step well beyond the limits of a medium's powers.

The fact the Libba Bray did not just use spiritualism, but rather gives Gemma a greater power than a medium possessed, is symbolic of Gemma's ability to have a true escape from Victorian society. Mediums may have participated in deviant behavior, but they were still imprisoned for it, still looked down upon, still subject, at least in some ways, to the behavioral boundaries set up by society. Selina can escape from imprisonment mentally using her ability, but her mind must rejoin her body in jail eventually. Gemma's greater power, however, is a sign that her escape will be more thorough than that. As Gemma's power grows, so does her independence. She learns that she is the High Priestess in the Order that rules the realms and that as such, *she* must sort out the troubles that threaten the realms' very existence. The freedom that she finds in the realms is accompanied by a responsibility for them, a responsibility that helped her to develop a strength of spirit that most Victorian girls never

had the chance to discover. Even if she could never set foot in the realms again, if her supernatural power disappeared, she could not go back to being another cog in the machine because she has learned too much, grown too much. Unlike the temporary escape of spiritualism, which lasted only as long as the medium could maintain the supernatural connection, the changes in Gemma and her friends are permanent.

Initially, they do escape to the realms on an episodic basis, but the changes in their characters that develop first from freedom and then from responsibility transcends worlds. "I would suggest that apart from the spiritual séance, disruptive in the break-up of the distinctions between the spiritual and the material worlds, any space/text connected with spiritualist activities is liable to contain some potential for subversion and disruption" wrote Arias (266). The girls already disrupt the norm by crossing into the realms, leaving the rest of their lives in a space with the "potential for subversion and disruption" (266). Echoing their ability to break the boundaries between the worlds, the girls break through the Victorian boundaries that trap them in their lives and once again step *beyond* those boundaries to a place where they are free to create their own rules. Or not.

This is not, of course, without strife and difficulty. The girls come up against barriers, both realistic and supernatural (everything from an overbearing grandmother's expectations to a plot to turn the realms over to the powers of darkness), that seem impede their progress, but it is how they handle these situations that allows them to develop. Each girl starts out in the beginning of the series in an unenviable position, scared, lonely, trapped, or some unfortunate combination of all of the above, but by the end of the books, they are proudly standing on their own two feet. Take Gemma, for example, the character whose development is given the most description and attention. She starts out scared of everything and unsure of herself, but as her power and responsibility in the realms grows, so too does her conviction that she is able to do right by the realms, that she is strong enough and wise enough to find her way. By the end, she is so sure of herself that when someone suggests she has made a mess in the realms, that she has broken the rules that kept them orderly for so long, she replies, "'Don't you understand? There are no rules anymore! I shall do as I bloody well see fit!'" (Bray, *Sweet Far* 728). She is literally talking about the realms, asserting that no one and nothing can govern her in relation to the realms. Metaphorically speaking, she has moved beyond governance in her real life as well. Indeed, when speaking to her father,

she is no longer helpless and mute, no longer afraid to speak her mind. “I shan’t attend any other parties. I don’t wish to continue my season” Gemma says to him (Bray, *Sweet Far* 793). “What I mean to say is, I don’t imagine this life is for me. Parties and endless balls and gossip. I don’t wish to spend my days making myself small enough to fit into such a narrow world. I cannot speak with their bit in my mouth” (Bray, *Sweet Far* 794). She chooses, instead, to go to university in America, to make an attempt at an independent and self-governed existence that she never could have dreamed of when she first came to London. The challenges that came along with ruling the realms served to make Gemma stronger, to help her come to an understanding of who she was and what she was capable of, and what she discovered was that she was capable of leading her life as she saw fit. She has moved beyond second-guessing herself, beyond waiting for others to determine if she is doing the right thing. She is free.

Besides learning to be a self-sufficient adult, Gemma has come to terms with her burgeoning sexuality (though not, notably, through marriage). Her sensual dreams used to terrify her; she didn’t understand them and she didn’t know how to react to them. Her relationship with Kartik, too, scared her. But at the end of *The Sweet Far Thing*, the final

book in the trilogy, she is no longer scared. She goes to the realms with Kartik, and is brave enough to share a dream with him, a dream of love and eternity and sex. When they awake, he kisses her, and she easily accepts his kisses, kisses which rile her body but not her mind. "He kisses me again, harder this time, but it's just as lovely. His lips are so necessary that I cannot imagine how I can live without tasting them always" (Bray, *Sweet Far* 615). In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Gemma could not admit that she enjoyed her dreams of Kartik – they did nothing but upset her and make her nervous. Now his real kisses make her happy, and she can admit to herself that she enjoys it, that she wants more. She is no longer meek and frightened; just as she came to terms with her power and learned how to appreciate it and use it to her advantage, so she has grown into her sexuality and is mature enough to handle it now.

It is important that Gemma does not confront her sexuality through marriage; indeed, none of the girls' happy endings involve marriage (not even Pippa's, in spite of her girlish daydreams of a knight in shining armor who would sweep her off her feet), but rather the ability to live their lives as they see fit. Most Victorian women married; even some followers of the "New Woman" philosophy followed the traditional path to marriage. As Shoemaker writes in his book, "marriage was a social and

financial necessity for most women. Women were expected to marry and breed, and as we shall see those who didn't faced disapproval" (91). The dominant societal structure called for a woman to marry when she came of age; it was one of a very few acceptable options and by far the most popular for proper young ladies, as Bray's main characters were. But *A Great and Terrible Beauty* and its sequels subvert the marital expectation. At the end of the trilogy, none of the four girls on whom the book focuses marry; the three that live choose instead to follow other paths to self-fulfillment and happiness. In particular, Gemma, who has had an ongoing flirtation with Kartik (scandalous enough in itself because he is Indian), does *not* end up with him. When the realms would have claimed Gemma and forced her to remain there for life (much as marriage would force a woman to remain, symbolically, in the house for the rest of her life), Kartik sacrifices himself and remains in the realms in her place. Thus, in this instance, the man and the woman switch roles: *Kartik* is trapped in one place while Gemma is free to go to New York to build a new life for herself and to go to university, as she chooses to do. Ann becomes an actress; Felicity moves to Paris and embraces the fact that she is gay. With this desertion of the marital expectation, the novel undermines all normal understandings of what it traditionally meant to be

a woman in the Victorian era and places the girls as New Women, or perhaps as something even more progressive than that. They are modern girls in an old world, living way before their time.

This subversion of the feminine norm in the novel offers an optimistic outlook on the position of women in society today. Clearly, the role of the female is still quite complicated and vastly entwined with the Victorian understanding of the female, or else the neo-Victorian novel wouldn't be such a popular setting for working out an understanding of femininity today. Gemma's and her friends' escapes from the conservative lives they were expected to lead marks a progression of the role of women in society; they echo the gradual social shift from the traditional Victorian understanding of women to the "New Woman" ideas and as such are symbolic of the continual transition of society's understanding of women, which is still going on in the present. Today, in both Britain and America, women have gained, amongst other things, the right to vote, the right to own property, and a growing equality with men in the workplace. This is not to say that women are no longer subjugated at all; men still earn more than women for the same job and society still has different expectations for men and women. Rather, just as Gemma and her friends have taken their first steps towards freedom, it indicates

that, as a society, we have taken our first steps towards sovereignty for women. At the beginning of the novel, Gemma and her friends are resigned to the lives that await them. They are hopeless. By the end of the novel, and even more certainly by the end of the trilogy, they have hope. They can see another way, another option other than the limited positions they were previously offered. This hope mirrors what awaits women today; not the guarantee of more freedom but the opportunity to build for themselves a world where they can be free and a life of their own choosing.

Earlier in the paper I drew a connection between Gemma's growing power and her emerging sexuality, and here I'd like to expand on that idea, particularly in relation to how that allows girls and young women today to identify with Gemma and the other characters in the novel. Obviously young girls today probably aren't trying to balance their emotional and physical development with the power to enter another world and the challenge of fitting into a corset, yet they still participate in the same kind of escape that Bray writes for her characters. Gemma and her friends can leave London and enter the realms when they need room to breathe, and so the realms become a place for Gemma to discover herself as she transitions into adulthood. In a similar manner, the novel

itself becomes a place for today's girls to navigate their adolescence.

When Gemma and her friends enter the realms, so, in a manner of speaking, do Bray's readers, albeit in a different fashion. They may not physically leave the windowsill where they're reading while the snow falls on the other side of the glass, but their minds are wrapped in the golden perfection of an everlasting sunset even while the frost creeps closer and the streetlamps flicker on. They escape from their everyday lives into the world of the novel, escape from the limitations of social propriety and parental expectations into a place where other people make the hard decisions, where the ending is almost sure to be happy, and where the realms are a true possibility and not just a figment of the imagination. They join Gemma on her journey and are given the chance to escape into the realms along with her. They can explore parts of themselves about which they are just beginning to learn through Gemma's description of her own experiences with the same struggles.

In his book, Philip Davis describes the Victorian as "the experience of feeling still situated *between* worlds – one of them previously firm but now near-dead and yet hauntingly missed; the other barely born, abruptly modern, and so strange and ungrounded as to seem closer to a loss than to a gain" (143). While a very accurate description of the Victorian era, this is

also precisely the feeling of adolescence; childhood is very nearly completely in the past, and yet adulthood is new, uncertain, and frightening. In an interview, Libba Bray said, “in doing research...I discovered that girls are girls, feelings are always feelings, whether it’s 1895 or 2005” (*Readers Guide*, 7). The difficulty of finding one’s way through adolescence, of transitioning from a girl to a woman, is equally as difficult whether it’s done in corsets or jeans, and young girls today can see their own challenges reflected in the novel. One reviewer wrote, “These scandals are worse than high school drama!”, drawing a connection between the challenges faced by the characters in the book and those faced by teens today (Book_girl44). Another reviewer wrote that “Gemma is a great heroine. She had the sort of confusions and issues that girls at present time could definitely relate to” (CoffeeGurl). Girls today, then, can still find resonance in the problems that Gemma works her way through and use the novel as a place to work through the same problems themselves, even if mastery of art and French isn’t at the top of their to-do list. It is how Gemma deals with her growing sexuality, her increasing responsibility for her own life (and others’ lives), and her struggle to make the right choices to which girls relate, not the dresses she wore while she did it.

The focus on the role of the female, in addition to allowing the novel to be relevant despite the gap in time, also allows the novel to span the distance between Great Britain, where it is set, and America, where it finds its primary audience. Great Britain and America have developed, if not simultaneously, in parallel ways, discovering and establishing the same general principles over time. Of particular importance to this paper is the way in which gender roles were and are similarly conceived on both sides of the Atlantic. Since America's origins lie in her youth as a British colony, the original connection is easy to establish. Since then, a reciprocal relationship has been maintained between the two nations. The Victorian era was a period of great change and development in several ways, and in both Britain and America the role of women was being debated and refigured. Well-known writers in both countries argued for everything from the traditional "Angel in the House" role to varying degrees of equality and independence for women. While there were some variations in the national arguments, the two nations' were very much connected with and influential on one another, leading one writer to state that this "affirms for the Woman Question as a whole what Mary Macarthur observed of the women's trade union leagues: that the British movement was both the grandmother and the granddaughter of the American"

(Helsing, Sheets, & Veeder, xiii). Ideas and writings moved back and forth across the Atlantic in a common exchange of ideas¹¹, and this exchange of ideas continued into and throughout the New Woman movement. “Christened in 1894 during a debate between Sarah Grand and Ouida in the *North American Review*, the New Woman immediately inspired censure and applause on both sides of the Atlantic” (Patterson, 2). Met with some resistance, the New Woman began to take root regardless, widening women’s sphere outside the domestic. Gradually, both nations began to grant women greater rights within their marriage (the right to have property, to maintain custody of the children in the event of a divorce, etc.) and also to open up new educational and vocational opportunities for women. Today, the exchange of ideas between Great Britain and America continues: our faster methods of communication and distribution serve to make the international conversation all the more fluent and influential.

¹¹ One example of this exchange can be found in the writings of John Ruskin, a British writer whose work was so popular in the U.S. that he was named one of the four most famous living authors by an American magazine in 1898.

Conclusion

Both Bray and Brontë choose to set their novels at some point in the past, and they do this to obtain objective distance. They were writing about issues very close to their hearts, evoking their own experiences and emotions to make it more realistic – to place it in their own world would have resulted in some beautifully written autobiographies. Put yourself in Libba Bray's shoes for a moment. If you are a woman, this is easy. If you're a man, imagine you're attempting to pen a story about an adolescent boy's life. Now imagine setting that story in your hometown, in the very era in which you grew up. It would be near impossible not to turn this imaginary novel into an autobiography. You would simply be too invested in the material, have too many of your own feelings and emotions wrapped up in the tale, to make it of any interest or intelligibility to anyone else. Charles Dickens, whose quote frames this paper, incorporates much of his own life into his novels. For example, in *David Copperfield*, many of the characters, such as Mr. Micawber, are based on characters from Dickens' life; it is set in London, where (and when) Dickens spent much of his childhood; and he, like Copperfield, worked under awful conditions at a factory as a young boy. Yet even he makes alterations to his reality; for instance, David Copperfield was orphaned at a young age and much of the novel revolves around the challenges that

face him because he has no parent to look after him, whereas Dickens did not grow up as an orphan. Objective distance is an absolute necessity.

Some authors change the main character, some the time, some the place, but unless they're shooting for a memoir, they change something.

Dickens chose to change his hero's family. Libba Bray and Charlotte Brontë choose to change the time. Bray places her characters in the late nineteenth century, making their development parallel to that of the "New Woman" movement. The particular setting of the Victorian, as opposed to any other, is important because of the influence the Victorian era has had in shaping today's world and because of the distinct contrast between the limited lives of Victorian "ladies" and today's women.

Similarly, Brontë also sets her novel in the past, nearly 50 years before it was published, in the world that set the stage for her own present. Both authors question whether their characters, limited by the societal standards for respectable young ladies, can escape traditional roles.

Brontë's Shirley, with a winning combination of wealth and spunk, at first seems the most likely out of *both* authors' characters to escape the life that is seemingly destined for her, but it is meek Gemma, who starts her trilogy by being shipped off to boarding school, who eventually breaks free. Bray is able to endow her characters with strong willpowers and

modern desires while Brontë's characters are limited to what *Brontë* understood to be possible when she published *Shirley*. The final situations of the characters' sanctuaries are representative of the different outcomes of their lives: Shirley's and Caroline's haven is destroyed by the industrial expansion of their husbands' mill, but Gemma's escape (the realms) remains intact because she was able to save both it and herself.

In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, one of the girls' teachers quotes Charles Dickens, "'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show'" (Bray, *Great and Terrible* 265). It is a question that Bray asks of her characters, and her readers, and it is a question that must be answered by all of us, male and female, young and old. This paper is, in essence, a study of what the authors' answers to that question is: were their characters, and, by extension, are women in their own era, capable of being the heroes of their own lives? The purpose of this paper is to determine the all-important answer to that question, to get a feel for the authors' understanding of their worlds, to understand the difference between those worlds, and, in doing so, to come to a better understanding of our own world and our place in it. These two works are perfect for this purpose because of the contrast they create by portraying similar

characters (spirited young girls) from different points of view. The difference in the authors' perspectives is personified in the lives of their characters at the end of the novels (Shirley and Caroline are married and their happiness is questionable, whereas Gemma and her friends are leading independent lives that are presumably fulfilling), and bringing the two works together creates a vibrant sense of how the world has changed. The different outcomes of their lives represent a change in what the authors consider likely or even possible. In *Shirley*, it is not even certain that the characters *want* to take on the role of being the heroes of their own stories: Caroline really wants to marry Robert, and Shirley, despite all her play at being Captain Keeldar, is really just holding out for Louis Moore. The end of the novel cinches it: by identifying Caroline and Shirley as the Mrs. Moore's, Brontë implies that they are *not* the heroes of their own lives; their husbands take the lead roles. This was the most common position a woman held in Brontë's world: to be someone's wife, and so it is what she knows and what she writes for her characters. Bray, on the other hand, is a modern woman living in a world with many more choices and possibilities for women. Bray offers her characters the chance to be their own leading ladies, but ultimately it is a question that each girl must answer for herself.

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Capstone Summary

In this paper, I compare two novels: *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* by Libba Bray. *Shirley* follows the lives of Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar as they try to navigate adolescence in the early nineteenth century. *A Great and Terrible Beauty* is the story of Gemma and her friends Pippa, Ann, and Felicity who, like Shirley and Caroline, are also transitioning into womanhood, only this time in the late Victorian era. These two pieces are written in different eras and are *set* in different eras, and as such their protagonists lead very different lives (for example, Gemma and her friends have access to an education at a finishing school, whereas Shirley and Caroline do not). But what they share is the fight, the struggle to get what they want in a society that would happily make them into something else. All of the central female characters face opposition in the novels simply because they *are women*. Certain dreams are disallowed, certain freedoms withheld, and what determines the differences between Bray's and Brontë's girls – and worlds – are the ways in which their characters face these challenges and whether or not they are able to overcome them.

Brontë's characters *are* ultimately shaped by society, but thanks to Bray's more modern mindset, her characters are endowed with more modern ideals and dreams and so are allowed to escape the constraints of their Victorian world. To prove this, I start by researching the role of women in Victorian England. It was

a very transitional time period, an era when feminists struggled to overcome traditional models of womanhood. While the “Angel in the House” role was still predominant, some women built lives for themselves outside of the normal social order. In general, though, this was very difficult, and proper ladies like Bray’s and Brontë’s characters would have been expected to take the well-worn path laid out for them. After establishing the dominant view, I then examine specific examples from the novels and analyze the way the characters’ minds work to demonstrate the differences between them. For example, in *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone wistfully dreams of having a profession, but in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Gemma and her friends set about making this very dream a reality for themselves. Their lives, at least at the end of the trilogy, consist of possibilities of which Shirley and Caroline can only fantasize. Ann becomes an actress; Gemma goes to university. These are things that simply were not a reasonable possibility for most women when Brontë was writing, and so Shirley and Caroline seem to fulfill the “Angel in the House” expectation while Bray’s characters do not. The authors’ different points of view create a difference in the girls’ fates.

This difference is mirrored in the strength of the escapes that each author creates for her characters. In order to argue this point, I use specific examples from the novels to demonstrate the disparity between the sanctuaries presented

in the two works. Shirley and, to some extent, Caroline, find their haven in nature – it is peaceful, (initially) undisturbed by mankind, and offers the girls freedom that they don't have in society, where there are people to judge their every move. Gemma and her friends are given the realms, a separate world that only Gemma can enter and where they are completely free to be wild, to learn forbidden things, and to develop independence and strength. But at the end of *Shirley*, nature is destroyed, lost to industrialization to satisfy the will of Shirley's and Caroline's husbands, while Bray's realms remain intact and stronger than ever at the end of the trilogy, which is symbolic of her characters' more independent futures. I also use research and examples from other neo-Victorian novels to show that Gemma's ability to enter the realms resembles spiritualism and that her ability to reach farther into that other world than any mere medium is symbolic of Gemma's (and her friends) greater ability to subvert Victorian norms. Spiritualism is a belief system that was popular in the Victorian era and was marked by its members' conviction that mediums could communicate with the world of the dead. With her power, Gemma can, like a medium, enter another world and even speak to the dead. But unlike mediums, Gemma could stay in that world and could even bring its magic back into her own world, and this greater power of hers is symbolic of her greater freedom.

I also argue that the common experience of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood is what makes these novels relevant to each other and to present-day audiences, particularly young girls who are experiencing many of the same things (for example, developing sexuality and a desire for greater independence) as the characters in the books. To do this, I examine examples from the books of common experiences that *don't* change over time. I then draw on modern-day readers' reviews of both authors' works to explain that they read these books because of these common experiences. They connect to the characters, find relevance to their own lives in the stories, and this is what makes them interested in reading books set so far away from their own lives (both in time and, for American readers, in space).

Finally, I also question why both authors choose to set their pieces in their relative pasts. I do this by studying both the Victorian era and the importance of neo-Victorian literature. By recognizing the importance of neo-Victorian literature and examining why it is such a popular genre, I can argue that both authors make this choice for two reasons: firstly, to obtain objective distance from their pieces and, secondly, to delve into a time that created their own present-day worlds. Further, researching the Victorian era led me to realize what a tremendous influence it has had on our modern world, and I am able to argue that Bray chose to write in this era precisely because of that effect.

In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Bray quotes Charles Dickens as he wrote in *David Copperfield*: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show...”

The purpose of this paper is to determine the all-important answer to that question, to get a feel for the authors’ understanding of their worlds, to understand the difference between those worlds, and, in doing so, to come to a better understanding of our own world and our place in it. *This* is why I find this topic to be so important and intriguing: because it dissects fiction and reveals the bits of reality hidden in it and because it helps us to see the bigger picture, to understand how things were, how they are now, and possibly even where they’re going, or at least where we want them to go. These two works are perfect for comparison because of the contrast they create by portraying similar characters from different points of view. The difference in the authors’ perspectives is personified in the lives of their characters at the end of the novels (Shirley and Caroline are married and their happiness is questionable, whereas Gemma and her friends are leading independent lives that are presumably fulfilling), and bringing the two works together creates a vibrant sense of how the world has changed. Fiction is far more telling than casual readers tend to recognize, and by examining it, we can learn quite a lot about ourselves and our world.

